

THINK FOCUS N°2

# THiNK

THE  
LOLA  
STEIN  
INSTITUTE  
JOURNAL

SPECIAL COLLECTION

## AWE AND WONDER

BY MOREH GREG BEILES



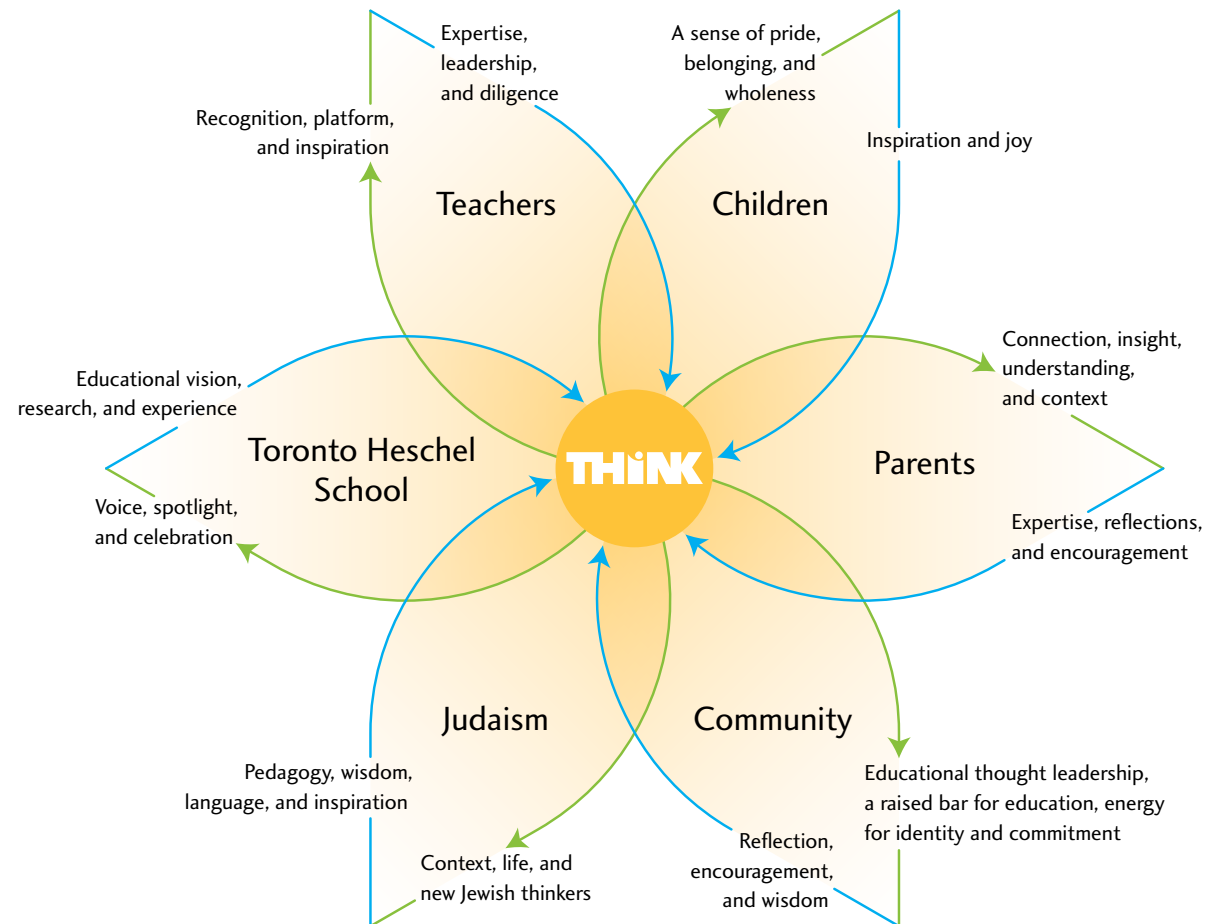
The Toronto Heschel School  
בית הספר על שם השל

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## The **THiNK** Ecosystem

This flower names what **THINK gives** to parents, the community, Judaism, The Toronto Heschel School, teachers, and children, and what **THINK receives** from them in return.



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Lola Stein z'l was an early female pharmacist in South Africa, but her special talent was in hospitality and friendship. She cared for family and friends, at home and abroad, individually, uniquely, and lovingly. We honour her memory in a way that also reaches out to many. We lovingly remember Mannie Stein z'l whose enthusiasm and support for our work with children is gratefully acknowledged.

Integrated Jewish Studies espoused by The Lola Stein Institute are delivered at The Toronto Heschel School, a Jewish day school in Toronto, Canada.

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# Welcome to Awe and Wonder

Dear Reader,

Our second Special Collection presents a sampling of Awe and Wonder which has been a core feature of *THINK* since 2008. The column is written by Dr. Greg Beiles, Head of The Toronto Heschel School and Director of The Lola Stein Institute. Awe and Wonder serves as the place where Moreh Greg shares and explains his unique integration of educational theory and practice. It sheds light on why the school he leads continues to blossom.

Awe and Wonder describes education that encompasses a child’s thoughtfulness, spirituality, and lived experience. Moreh Greg entitled the column Awe and Wonder with reference to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who wrote, “The beginning of awe is wonder...and the beginning of wisdom is awe.” This succinct expression is key to understanding the teaching of Moreh Greg.

Curating these articles, it was fascinating to watch them group themselves according to the words of the Shema which say,

“You shall love Adonai your God *with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength*. Place these words which I have commanded you today on your heart, and *teach them to your children*.”

The first section of this collection is called *Bechol Levavkha* (Heart of the Matter). In ancient times, the heart was considered the seat of consciousness. Our selection is about thinking: it includes articles on different ways of thinking inspired by Jewish sources, literature, and science.

The second section, *Bechol Nafshekha* (Depth of Spirit), pertains to matters of the spirit. Here we read about teaching from the inside-out, inspiring imagination and deep thinking.

The third section, *Bechol Me’odkhah* (Art of Living) considers the habits of mind, rituals, and practices that ground learning in lived experience.

*THINK: AWE AND WONDER* presents articles published in past issues of the journal and most directly represent the column as a whole. All of the past issues of *THINK* magazine are available online for you to explore further if you are interested ([www.thinkmag.ca](http://www.thinkmag.ca)).

When you look with Awe and Wonder, we hope you enjoy the view.

**Pam Medjuck Stein**  
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# School of Salmon

AN ECOSYSTEM FOR SUCCESSFUL LEARNING

Researchers have discovered that the quantity of salmon returning to spawn in coastal streams and rivers in British Columbia directly affects the flora and fauna of the old-growth forest surrounding the streams. The discovery suggests a new paradigm for understanding the relationship between species and the environments in which they live. Old models tended to focus on how certain animals would thrive in particular habitats without looking at how the environment responded to hosting those particular species. The new recognition is that some animals—in this case, salmon—have a reciprocal affect on the place where they live. As *The Globe and Mail* reported on this research,

When bears, wolves and other animals drag salmon carcasses from spawning streams they cause an intricate chain reaction that changes the nature of the surrounding forest, according to new research from Simon Fraser University.

Plant species that efficiently take up nitrogen from the decomposing bodies of salmon flourish—and soon there are more song birds, drawn by the dense growths of wild berry bushes and prolific insect hatches.<sup>1</sup>

In this habitat, not only did an increase of salmon improve conditions for other plants and animals, they also

enhanced conditions for their own survival. Salmon require cool streams in which to lay their eggs. Old-growth forest, with dense foliage and tall trees, blocks out the sun and keeps the streams cool; the salmon create the forest that enables them to thrive.

As a result of this research, the “Salmon Forest” became an exemplar of dynamic interactions among diverse living and non-living elements—plants, animals, streams, minerals—within an ecosystem. Human activity was also identified as an element within this web of interactions.

When I was Director of Curriculum at The Toronto Heschel School, I centred our Grade 3 Habitats Study around the “Salmon Forest Ecosystem.” We wanted our students to see how plants, animals, and people affect one another in vital sustainable relationships. Our school has an ardent interest in ecological stewardship, and we like to draw models for sustainability from the natural world.

To show the intimate connection between the needs of individuals and their communities and contexts, we also integrated the Jewish adage: אם אין אני לי מי לי? כשאני לעצמי מה אני? —“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I?” The Salmon Forest became our paradigm, not only for understanding physical habitat, but also for seeing the Grade 3 class community as an interdependent ecosystem of individuals.

אם אין אני לי מי לי? כשאני לעצמי מה אני?

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I?”

Now, as Head of School, I see that the Salmon Forest has much to teach about our school as a whole. Using “ecosystems” as a way to analyze organizations and businesses is not new, but the remarkable web of mutual reinforcements in the Salmon Forest Ecosystem offers a particularly appropriate model for the intensively integrated elements of our school.

The Toronto Heschel School is founded on a vision of multi-level integration: the school presents an integrated curriculum, in which different academic disciplines—math, history, science, Chumash, French, Talmud, English, and Hebrew—are taught in a way that mutually reinforces concepts of each discipline. The school is intentionally pluralistic, advocating creative interplay between the different streams of Jewish practice. The school sees the child as a whole person, whose social, physical, intellectual, and spiritual development is understood as an interconnected adaptive process.

However, as all successful organizations know, it is one thing to have a vision, quite another to bring the vision to reality and sustain it over time. We understood that vision, practice, and maintenance must be mutually supportive, and we embedded this educational philosophy into the by-laws of the school. What contributes to The Toronto Heschel School’s *thriving ecosystem* is how the vision inspires the organizational systems and cultural norms that, in turn, sustain the unique vision. The interplay of vision, systems, norms, and culture embody the complexity for which the Salmon Forest is an apt analogy.

Teaching a curriculum that integrates academic disciplines requires an intense level of collaborative planning by senior educator leaders and classroom teachers. In turn, organized collaborative planning necessitates logistical preparation for designated opportunities when teaching teams can meet to develop, document, and refine the collective product. Our teachers have planning time built into their weekly schedules; time for team work and time when they are mentored in efficient, effective, educational strategies. Because the teachers are simultaneously learners and participants in a progressive and evolving curriculum, they are attuned to the spirit and rationale behind it; they feel ownership of the educational artistry and are passionate about teaching it in class. With the right organizational “habitat,” the talent and skill that each teacher brings to the table coalesce to produce results that inspire the teacher to want

to do more and to do it better, enhancing the educational “habitat.” Inventive curriculum inspires engaged learners, and engaged learners inspire our teachers to innovate further.

A creatively integrated curriculum, infused with the arts, social action, and meaningful Jewish content, inspires children, teachers, and families alike. The Heschel School’s learning environment successfully attracts engaged, committed families from across the spectrum of Jewish practice. The resulting mix of enthusiastic young families, in turn, enhances the school’s vision of pluralism and the feeling that all Jews are welcome. Families who come to the school are looking beyond traditional categories of Jewish identity; there is an appreciation of a school’s role in the development of a child’s identity. Beyond academics and physical fitness, young families are now attentive to social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual learning. They are receptive to new modes of learning. The presence of these families in the school challenges the teachers’ leadership further to ensure the highest standards. The reciprocity between school and family is another key part of what makes the school’s habitat flourish.

Academics is only one piece of a school’s thriving ecosystem. To ensure that all students learn well, there must be a positive school culture that includes respect and mutual concern among teachers, students, and parents. A child, who feels left out, bullied, or unsafe cannot learn well, so the concept *Derech Eretz Kadma L’Tora*—respectful behaviour precedes learning—is paramount. At the Heschel School we place a premium on developing pro-social behaviour using *middot* (ethical practices) drawn from Torah as our models. Each week, schoolwide, we practise a particular middah, such as “encourage others to have confidence” and “offer some of what you have to others.” At the end of the week, students reflect on their practice of the *middah* and describe seeing others perform it too.

Visitors continually comment on how respectful the students are—that they hold doors open for one another and for guests; that they are friendly and caring towards one another. Our students learn frameworks and implement protocols for class conversations to ensure all voices are heard. In Junior High, students participate in a weekly civics class using a democratic process to deliberate, gradually select, and then implement a *tzedakah* project.

A culture of mutual respect and care among children requires adults to role model the behaviour. When children

continued on page 30



As we move through the 21st century, we see that “ways of thinking” or “habits of heart and mind” are becoming the central goals of education.

# Education for the Next Generation

## USING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES TO TEACH CHILDREN HOW TO THINK

**S**ir Ken Robinson is an internationally recognized leader in education, creativity, and innovation. He asserts that, as a society, we are no longer certain what our children will need to know to be successful in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Citing the rapid rate of change in society today, Sir Ken has boldly articulated that what students learn today might not be useful tomorrow. He says we don’t know what “stuff” or what “information” they will need.

What we can anticipate is that our children will have to be good thinkers and, especially, good learners.

They will need to be capable of analyzing problems and new situations. Their generation will be required to develop well-considered innovative solutions for the many changing situations they will encounter. We don’t know what “stuff” they’ll need to know, but we do know they’ll need to be smart, mentally agile, and creative.

But wait! If a content-based curriculum is inadequate, what happens to math, science, language arts, history—all the courses and subjects that we associate with a good education? Should we replace them with a “critical thinking class” or a “creativity class”? I think not. I believe it would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We would lose excellent educational practices developed over centuries, even as we refresh our educational vision.

Rather than jettisoning traditional school subjects, I suggest we reconceive their role. We should value them, not as a means to convey certain information, but as vehicles for developing specific ways of thinking, for honing cognitive abilities, and for nurturing habits of mind. Instead of math or science or language or music being a matter of “stuff” deposited in the minds of our children, we can appreciate these classes as “disciplines,” as ways of training our minds towards particular ends. Since we don’t know what specific information our children will need, our best recourse is to teach them what we do know in ways that sharpen their minds for the future. Indeed, this is exactly what academic disciplines were originally all about.

The Scientific Revolution (1550–1700) was primarily a revolution in thinking, not in information. The discipline of science involves asking authentic questions, developing hypotheses, designing and conducting experiments, and reaching provisional conclusions that lead to more questions. The scientific method imbues students with curiosity and confidence and gives them practice in analyzing dilemmas they are sure to encounter as they grow. Looking up known facts, even under the glorified name of “research,” is not science.

Mathematics involves representing quantities and processes in symbols that can be manipulated in efficient, logical ways. Therefore, it is critical that students appreciate the relationship between symbols and the processes they represent.

Similarly, language arts must engage students in thinking like real writers. Teachers can activate their students’ imaginations and encourage ideas to flow. Thereafter, students can learn to organize ideas in ways that allow them to communicate their thoughts to a reader. This discipline includes teaching children grammar in a functional way, where commas, periods, and quotation marks are not seen as “conventions” but as tools for making expressions clear.

In social science and history classes, students should examine primary sources and discover how historical knowledge is constructed. When they approach their study as “historians” and “archeologists,” they learn to ask critical questions, link their ideas to other knowledge, and ground their conjectures with evidence.

The arts—visual art, dance, music, drama—are key disciplines that train students in flexible and creative ways of thinking. As research continues to show, when we practise an art, we strengthen our mind’s executive function, which is the ability to self-regulate and stay focused on a task.<sup>2</sup> Whether students are working with modelling clay or their own bodies and voices, the arts facilitate how students

experience the physical materials of existence. Indeed, the arts offer us ways to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas that might otherwise remain buried. Innovation depends largely on the arts.

The Judaic “subjects” must also be understood as “disciplines” and ways of thinking, and not only as “Jewish content” that we can use to teach children how to be “good Jews” or how to perform at *b’nei mitzvah* ceremonies. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that Judaism is not just a way of living but also a way of thinking; and that the *mitzvot* are not done for one particular reason, they are “sources of emergent meaning.”<sup>3</sup>

If there is one essential Jewish way of thinking, it is the ability to look at a text or at a situation from many points of view, to look beyond the obvious, to interpret, and to seek and find deeper meaning. Knowledge of the Hebrew language is the gateway to any Jewish learning that takes us beyond the superficial.

Jewish disciplines, such as Chumash and Talmud, engender excellent memory skills and cognitive training. The intellectual skill achieved by Jewish scholars is inherent in textual analysis as well as in decoding strands of an argument, distinguishing competing commentaries, and correlating sources. It is no accident that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Jewish students who were deeply trained in Torah and Talmud took so easily to the study of law, medicine, and science.

As we move through the 21st century, we see that “ways of thinking” or “habits of heart and mind” are becoming the central goals of education. Some of these “ways of thinking” are best nurtured through the traditional disciplines: thinking like a scientist, like a mathematician, like a historian, like a writer, and so on. Other “habits of heart and mind” are nurtured through the cognitively rigorous and ethically essential Jewish ways of thinking and being.

We want our children to discern what is happening in the world around them. We hope they seek to meet the challenge of rapid societal change with their hearts and minds wide open. Academic disciplines—both universal and Jewish—offer the most reliable framework for this important pursuit.

<sup>1</sup> See Ken Robinson, “Changing Education Paradigms,” retrieved March 12, 2012, from [http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_changing\\_education\\_paradigms.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms.html)

<sup>2</sup> For examples of this research, see the Dana Foundation website which has links to numerous peer-reviewed articles. <http://www.dana.org/artseducation.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996).

Adapted from an article originally published in *THINK*, Issue 11, Spring 2012.

### The Art and Science of Communication

#### Artful Thinking

#### Scientific Thinking

#### Thinking Like a Historian

#### Mathematical Thinking

#### Judaic Disciplines

#### Language Learning



# Fishing for Words

HOW POETRY AND METAPHOR  
MAKE US LITERATE

The Jewish month of *Cheshvan* is called *Mar Cheshvan*, which means “bitter *Cheshvan*,” for it is the only month of the Jewish calendar in which no religious or historical festivals take place. To take the edge off bitter *Cheshvan*, which coincides with an often dreary Canadian November, The Toronto Heschel school creates its own annual celebration—a Poetry Festival. The Festival has become both an academic and soulful treasure that delights the entire school community.

Coming six weeks into the school year, the Poetry Festival marks the culmination of the first unit of English Language Arts study for all students from Grades 1 to 8. With heightened concern these days over early literacy, a back-to-basics approach to reading and writing, and making sure that everyone can spell, one might wonder why our school chooses to dedicate the first full unit of the year to the study of poetry.

Many language arts programs consider poetry to be a bit of a frill—something to touch on later in the school year, once students have nailed down their particular grade level’s basic requirements for writing. Our poetry curriculum is based on the premise that good writing of any sort is, in fact, deeply rooted in how children think, feel, and experience the world. We concur with educational philosopher and psychologist Professor Kieran Egan who teaches that poetry lies at the root of human thinking and therefore deserves a formative place in the curriculum.

Egan rejects the Piagetian notion that young children think concretely and are capable of the more sophisticated forms of thinking usually associated with poetry only later in their maturation. Egan asserts, “The central fact of our minds is their poetic nature.”

Egan cites researchers such as Howard Gardner and Ellen Winner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education to explain further:

Human children are equipped with some specific intellectual capacities that reach their peak in our early years... For example our ability to generate appropriate metaphors reaches its peak by age five, and declines thereafter.<sup>1</sup>

According to Egan, the linguistic practices that are inherent in poetry are not advanced cognitive development, but are, in fact, “the true basics of education.” Many elements of poetry, such as forming images from words, understanding abstract notions and appreciating the moods and emotions

that different cadences and rhythms can convey, are fundamental to the way the human mind works and makes sense of the world.

Egan’s point becomes clear when we recognize that the technique of metaphor, which is usually only valued as a language skill, is at play whenever children are able to understand one thing in terms of another. When a child imagines that a leaf is a bird flitting down to the ground, or an airplane soaring up in the sky, they are engaging in sophisticated metaphorical thinking. It is this same cognitive leap through metaphor that allows a child to accept the figure “4” as equivalent to four three-dimensional objects on a table.

Ted Hughes is another thinker who recognizes that the techniques of expression involved in poetry closely mirrors the way the minds of children actually work. His book *Poetry in the Making* is one of the finest on teaching poetry. Hughes writes that reading and writing poetry amounts to “learning to think.”

The thinking that we learn in poetry is a kind of thinking that we often ignore; it is the contemplative activity that helps us express our most elusive perceptions and thoughts. Hughes describes how, as a school boy, he felt “plagued” by his inability to express his thoughts in words:

I became very interested in those thoughts of mine I could never catch. Sometimes they were hardly what you could call a thought—they were a dim sort of feeling about something. They did not fit into any particular subject—history or arithmetic or anything of that sort.<sup>2</sup>

Hughes writes that inchoate thoughts and feelings that belong to the world of “memory, emotion, imagination, intelligence, and natural common sense” are not mere embellishments to life, but in fact constitute “the world of final reality... which goes on all the time, consciously or unconsciously, like the heartbeat.”<sup>3</sup> The “thinking” that poetry teaches is the process by which we reach this inner life.

Hughes likens poetic thinking to fishing. If we do not learn this way of thinking, “then our minds live in us like fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.” Hughes draws further on the metaphor of fishing to evoke the practices of patience, close observation, and “concentration on a small point” that we use when we read and write poetry.

And yet poetry is not only about reaching inside ourselves, it is also a way to communicate and share our thoughts and emotions with others. Just as science constitutes a method

for investigating and sharing knowledge about natural phenomena, so poetry provides a method for exploring and sharing inner personal experiences.

Metaphor—the ability to see one thing in terms of another—allows us to express unique experiences, and yet understand one another. For Robbie Burns, love is a “red, red, rose,” Leonard Cohen calls it “a broken Hallelujah” and, for e.e. cummings, “nothing, not even the rain has such small hands.” Each poet describes love using a different metaphor; and yet, through our common understandings of roses, broken praises, rain, and hands, we can share in these poets’ individual experiences of love.

Metaphor’s remarkable quality to preserve a unique experience and yet to render it shareable, is what Natalie Goldberg, author of *Writing Down the Bones*, means when she writes, “We are all connected. Metaphor knows this and therefore is religious.”<sup>4</sup> This “religious” quality of metaphor is the premise behind a Grade 5 unit of study that we call “Metaphor and God.” Since metaphor helps us relate to feelings and thoughts which are inaccessible through regular language, “God talk” is one place where the power of metaphor comes to the fore. In this unit students explore the many metaphors for God found in the Bible and the *siddur* (prayer book). These include “healer,” “source of life,” “maker of peace,” and “parent.” By regarding these terms as “metaphors,” students see how we can articulate our diverse experiences of God without pinning God down through a singular definition. They also appreciate that while each of us accesses experiences of God differently, as a community we all acknowledge the same one God.

Through its ability to articulate unique personal experiences, within the framework of shared understandings, poetry builds communities of young learners founded on respect for individuality and empathy for one another. It is this kind of community, nurtured by the “small hands” of poetry that we celebrate during our Poetry Festival. And so, in *Mar Cheshvan*—the bitter month—we hear a very sweet song.

1 Kieran Egan, “The Arts as the Basics of Education,” *Childhood Education*, Vol. 73, No. 6 (1997), p. 8.

2 Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 55.

3 Ibid., p. 57.

4 Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, new ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), p. 45.

This article was originally published in *THINK*, Issue 13, Spring 2013, with contributions from **Lesley Cohen**, who teaches Grade 6 and Junior High music at The Toronto Heschel School.



# Method and Wonder

WHERE SCIENCE AND JUDAISM MEET

A colleague once joked that, in a Jewish day school, there are two subjects that are Holy: Math and Science. The distinction is that the Holy of Holies is Science. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of science and religion in Jewish day schools has potential for controversy. To avoid it, a *mechitzah* (a division or separation) is generally placed between the two—and never the twain shall meet. One is taught in the morning, the other in the afternoon; assign different teachers, each expert in one field and less than so in the other.

Avoiding the complexity of how and where religion and science interact is understandable, but regrettable. Such sidestepping presents students with false dichotomies between truth and faith; it oversimplifies science, and it diminishes the grandeur of Judaism. In our work at The Toronto Heschel School, we explore the fertile terrain where science and Judaism not merely coexist but enrich one another.

The first step is to honour both science and Judaism as disciplined ways of encountering the world, not simply as sets of knowledge or sentimentally charged experiences. Core principles of the scientific approach or “scientific method” involve asking a question, for which a hypothesis is proposed, then tested. The method evolved over the millennia from Ancient Egypt, Greece, Babylonia, and India, through Islamic philosophy and science to the European Renaissance and the modern age.

*Nullius in verba* is the motto of the United Kingdom’s academy of natural science, The Royal Society. It translates from the Latin to mean “not on the word.” If you want to know the truth, don’t take anyone’s word for it—test it out for yourself. Sadly, what often passes for science curriculum in schools is the memorization of facts and formula, which is anathema to science itself; masters of the method, such as Aristotle and Galileo, would shake their heads.

At Heschel, we structure science education through the essential elements of the scientific method. From the earliest age, students learn how to observe real life closely and reach meaningful conclusions through experimentation. We use the world as our laboratory. They are active scientists, not passive recipients of scientific information.

To study ecosystems, students scrutinize organisms living inside one square metre of our school’s yard; to study animal behaviour, they choose a dog, cat, woodpecker, or squirrel

who lives in their home, backyard, or local park and formulate their understanding through patient daily observations. They learn celestial relations of the sun, earth, and moon, by stepping outside their homes at night to chart the movement of the moon; they aggregate their data, and verify or modify their discoveries in light of the evidence. To study the systems of the human body, students run races, meticulously recording and testing the correlation between their heartbeat and breathing rates. Prior to looking at diagrams and models that present the conclusions of anatomists, students make and test their own hypotheses about the relationship between the circulatory and respiratory systems.

The scientific method answers questions of “how?” It looks to causality: How does vapour rise and form into raindrops? How does light refract through those drops to make a rainbow? Science can explain how the sky can appear blue through refracted light and the physiology of the human eye. It cannot answer the question, “Why is the sky blue?”

Judaism addresses the “why?” It looks to questions of purpose; questions that are particular to our tradition, such as “Why do we observe the ritual of Passover?” and those that are broader, such as “Why was the world created and what is our place in it?” Like science, Judaism has a method to answer its questions. According to Rabbi A.J. Heschel, the Jewish way of thinking is rooted in a sense of awe and wonder. “Wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge,”<sup>1</sup> he writes. It first seems that Heschel is differentiating the Jewish method from the scientific method, which is grounded in “doubt” and skepticism. However, by emphasizing the value of “wonder,” he signals a critical place where Judaism and science interact. Science leads us down the path of discovery; wonder gives us a reason to go there, and stops us in our tracks at important moments along the journey.

A number of years ago, when teaching both science and Torah with my Grade 5 students, I noticed that Moshe’s encounter with the burning bush contained many elements of the scientific method. When he notices a bush burning in the desert, and stops to carefully observe the strange phenomenon, he wonders, “Why is the bush not burned up?” and then tests his observations by watching closely over a period of time. He makes an analysis and arrives at a conclusion based on what he has seen.

Alongside correlation to the scientific method, two points in the encounter belong to the domain of wonder and religion. The first is when Moshe turns aside from his daily task of shepherding to contemplate this “great sight.” Prior even to analysis and investigation is the moment of awe and wonder that captivates. The Hebrew word *nes*, poorly translated as “miracle,” really means “a sign” of something wondrous. The Jewish concept of a created world is a world full of such “signs.” It awaits human beings, naturally replete with awe and wonder, to contemplate their meaning.

The second “religious” moment comes at the end of the encounter, in the way that Moshe grasps the moral implications of his experience. The understanding comes to him literally as an “epiphany”—the voice of God—that tells Moshe to lead the people of Israel out of servitude. Later interpreters clarify that the fire represents the pain of slavery, and the permanence of the bush reveals the endurance of the people in their spirit of freedom (Midrash Shemot Rabbah 2:5). Moshe begins with awe and wonder, employs the scientific method of observation and analysis, and returns to religion to make a moral decision. I dubbed this productive integration of science and religion Moshe’s Miraculous Method.

Judaism answers its questions by seeking connections between natural, historical, and sociological conditions to generate moral meaning and action. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, author of *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning*, puts it this way: “Science takes things apart to see how they work; religion puts things together to see what they mean.”<sup>2</sup> Science helps us understand how an astounding variety of species exists on earth; Judaism helps us make the best choices to act responsibly and morally within the complexity of creation. A well-developed capacity for awe and wonder heightens our sensitivity to the relationships and connections required for moral reasoning.

Science—and therefore discovery—benefits when students are nurtured in the practices of awe and wonder; trained to gaze thoughtfully at a starry night and to contemplate what lives in the grasses beneath their feet. Judaism benefits when students understand that critical thinking, asking questions, and experimenting promote moral decision-making and the understanding of human purpose.

Jewish tradition regards Avraham as a great scientist, and it regards monotheism as highly correlated with reason and rationality (Bereshit Rabba 39:1). When Avraham went out to gaze at the stars in the sky, he recognized in this “great sight” a profound responsibility for future generations. We owe our children this same capacity for insight, the one that comes when science and Judaism meet on the horizon.

1 A.J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 53.

2 Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Schocken Books, 2012), p. 2.

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Science leads us down the path of discovery;  
wonder gives us a reason to go there.



# A Thoughtful Jewish School

WHY RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL  
IS OUR INSPIRATION

For the past 17 [now 19] years I have had the privilege of being associated with a thoughtful Jewish school. This school might also be described as “dynamic,” “innovative,” “progressive,” “caring,” along with many other positive attributes. And yet, when it comes down to it, I refer to it as a “thoughtful” school, and this is what I mean:

A “thoughtful” school is one that is intentional and considerate of all aspects of the educational experience of its students.

A thoughtful school is one based on a well-honed educational philosophy which permeates every aspect of the school, from its choice of curriculum and teaching methods, to the design of its classrooms and timetable, to the way it nurtures its community of teachers, parents, and students.

A Jewish school that aspires to be a *thoughtful* Jewish school roots its approach in Jewish thought and a historical Jewish context. It draws from the well of these sources to develop well-considered, well-honed, and authentically Jewish educational practices.

The Toronto Heschel School is a thoughtful Jewish school. It sources its educational philosophy in the ideas and life work of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Heschel is best known for combining a deep sense of Jewish spirituality, what he called “awe and wonder,” with respect for the dignity of every person “born in the image of God,” and with civil activism inspired by the prophetic tradition of the Bible. He strongly supported the American Civil Rights movement, and openly opposed the Vietnam War.

Heschel’s relationship and (critical) appreciation of diverse articulations of Judaism—along with his integration of Jewish spirituality and ethical activism—made him a unique figure for his time. It also made him an ideal representative for a school in Toronto that wished to grow from a deeply rooted, authentically Jewish, yet modern educational philosophy.

Each aspect of The Toronto Heschel School connects back to the ideas about Judaism and about the purpose of human existence articulated by Heschel. These ideas were not Heschel’s alone; they are, as he himself would readily agree, rooted in ancient Jewish thought and tradition. Yet Heschel was an exemplar of a person who lived and taught these ideas in practice, as a modern Jewish citizen.

The school’s pluralistic philosophy emerges from Heschel’s trans-denominational experience and his recognition that each stream of Judaism has something to contribute. Heschel’s thought echoes the phrase “We were all at Sinai,” the traditional Jewish concept that each Jew was present to hear the revelation of the Torah, and therefore each has something authentic to contribute to understanding, discussing, and fulfilling Torah.

Inspired by this idea, each child at The Toronto Heschel School is recognized as a legitimate contributor to classroom discourse. Respecting the unique contribution of each child’s questions and comments, classroom seating is arranged in a circle or small groupings; children face one another, and not each other’s backs. These practices of respect for the learner and his/her contributions nurture students to ask the best questions when they go on field trips, and inspire graduates to ask questions when they sit in high school classes with students from other schools. These practices make our students recognizable.

Heschel regarded radical amazement—“awe and wonder”—at all of God’s creation to be essential for learning. “Wonder not doubt, is the beginning of knowledge,” he wrote.<sup>1</sup> For the teachers at The Toronto Heschel School, a classroom that inspires wonder is paramount. For this reason each classroom is designed with objects, texts, and images that spark curiosity, questions, and discussion. Teachers are strongly encouraged to display remarkable objects from nature—a beehive, a conch shell, a magnificently curled *shofar*—that evoke children’s natural sense of wonder and inspire investigation. The school’s full commitment to environmental stewardship is grounded on Heschel’s deep respect for creation, and his view that the natural world is our “sibling,” co-created with us,<sup>2</sup> and deserving of our care and concern.

When The Toronto Heschel School looks to educational research to develop its pedagogical practices, it keeps its Jewishly inspired framework foremost in mind. When the school founders investigated Howard Gardener’s work on multiple intelligences, they were attracted not simply by its stated pedagogical efficacy but because it reflected Heschel’s respect for each human being as a unique learner. Likewise, The Toronto Heschel School’s arts-based approach

is developed from the recognition that the arts inspire awe and wonder and offer diverse opportunities for exploration and interpretation—Jewish and universal alike.

Heschel was a rigorous thinker, who demanded the highest standards from himself and his students. He placed tremendous emphasis on study, and stated that “learning is decisive” for the purpose of human living. He regarded learning as “a source of adventure” and “a source of joy,” and yet believed that the highest purpose of learning was to discover “the importance of self-discipline, the realization, namely, that a life without self-discipline is not worth living.”<sup>3</sup>

Educators at The Toronto Heschel School have made Heschel’s three purposes for learning the pillars of their educational philosophy—joy, adventure, and self-discipline. These principles apply whether children are learning a text from Torah, engaging in a difficult math question, or learning to pace themselves as they run laps around the school field.

For Heschel, an even higher form of Jewish activity is civic activism; personal dignity, discovered through learning, and other practices of discipline, such as prayer and ritual *mitzvot*, are the preparation. Heschel’s writings accentuate the prophetic tradition in Judaism that regards redress of inequity and injustice as core teachings of Torah. Inspired by this vision, The Toronto Heschel School integrates *tzedakah* projects deeply into its curriculum through its Jewish civics program and the graduating class’ human rights speeches. Through a school-wide and year-long program, Weekly *Middot* (ethical actions), the concept of *Derekh Eretz* (respect for one another on a daily basis) is woven deeply into its culture.

Not surprisingly, a thoughtful approach to Jewish education attracts teachers who are looking for a higher standard of Jewish teaching and learning. The Toronto Heschel School is thoughtful not only about how it teaches its students but also how it trains and develops Jewish educators with ongoing training, mentorship, and collaborative planning. And, of course, a thoughtful Jewish school attracts thoughtful Jewish parents, who are also interested in learning for their children’s sake and their own.

By nurturing thoughtful educators and families, the thoughtful Jewish school develops not only thoughtful children but also a thoughtful Jewish community at large. A thoughtful education doesn’t happen by accident, but by deliberate, painstaking, and rigorous foresight.

1 A.J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), pp. 11–12.

2 A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), p. 94.

3 A.J. Heschel interview with Carl Stern, in A.J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 369.

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# Teaching from the Inside-Out

A JEWISH VIEW

Jewish educators in the 21st century face a unique dilemma. Do we follow our instincts as modern progressive educators and focus on learner-centred education, or do we root ourselves in our heritage and let the Jewish curriculum impart its wisdom? Put another way, do we teach from the inside-out or from the outside-in?

Is there a third path? Can we allow Judaism, which we learn from the “outside,” to serve as a vocabulary enabling new learning to emerge from within? Can we teach this?

Progressive education is oriented towards children as learners, their thinking skills, their habits of mind and motivations. For the past 75 years, psychologists, such as Jean Piaget, have studied how children think and learn; progressive education blossomed from their theories on the developmental stages of cognition. An alternative and more traditional view of education places emphasis on particular content: facts and ideas, cultural and intellectual capital. Jewish education, with its rich tradition of texts, norms, and practices, naturally fits into this more traditional format.

Learner-centred education began with the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution, which rejected doctrinal Church “curriculum” in favour of using observation and reason to reveal truths about the universe. When progressive educators talk about “discovery-based learning,” they are invoking the right of children to use the scientific method—their senses and their reason—instead of memorizing and regurgitating preset knowledge.

The Renaissance also emphasized the importance of the individual and the inner life of the person. William Shakespeare’s soliloquies revealed the hearts and souls of his characters, and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* was the first portrait to convey the uniqueness of the individual. When we orient education today towards the development of the whole child, we are also invoking these perspectives.

Jewish education by definition has curriculum with important cultural, intellectual, and spiritual content. We study ancient texts and traditions. The Torah stands at the centre of Jewish learning, along with the Mishnah and Gemara. We also have religious and cultural practices and historical narratives that we feel are important for our children to learn. A curriculum-based pedagogy is recommended by the Torah itself, which instructs us to recite daily: “You shall repeat these teachings to your children” (Deuteronomy 11:19).

We may well wonder whether a “learner-oriented” approach is consistent with Jewish learning. Can we possibly teach Judaism from the inside-out?

## The richest meaning emerges when we acknowledge the uniqueness of each learner.

I believe a slightly different view of teaching from the inside-out is consistent with both child-centred learning and the strongest impulses and traditions of Jewish learning. First, we must expose one of the weak spots of learner-centred education, namely, its failure to account for the importance of culture in the development of thought. The most obvious example relates to language.

No child, however motivated, curious or scientifically minded, can learn to communicate without language. Some argue that without language, we cannot even think. And, let’s face it, language is an imposed curriculum. We don’t ask children if they want to learn the language of their family and culture; we just expect them to do so.

How children learn a language is incredibly fascinating. As the Russian-Jewish psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, discovered, children learn language by experimenting with thoughts and sounds until they can match them up in a meaningful way. He noticed children mimic and play with the sounds and words they hear even before the sounds and words have any meaning for them. This is evident in children’s babbling, and later, in their misuse of words and grammar as they figure out how it all works.<sup>1</sup>

The content-based curriculum of Judaism is a language. We expect our children to use it before it is fully understandable to them and we encourage them to find meaning in what they are hearing and seeing. They watch the Shabbat candle lighting and they hold up the challah. They separate milk from meat and perform acts of *tzedakah*. The reasons for doing each act change, deepen, and become meaningful only over time.

Jewish rituals are learned as the nouns and verbs of sentences that take on life-meaning that children slowly construct; *mitzvot* (obligations) are the verses of poetry in a language of ideas that begins very early. The Jewish sentences, paragraphs, and soliloquies that our children compose, in the language we give them, will reflect their individual processes to find meaning.

The Torah teaches that in each generation children inquire and seek meaning afresh. On three separate occasions, it is written that future children will ask about the meaning of the central Jewish ritual—Passover:

“And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say to you: What mean you by this service...” (Exodus 12:26)

“And it shall be when your child asks you in time to come...” (Exodus 13:14)

“When your child asks you in time to come, saying what mean the testimonies, and the statutes and the ordinances, which the ETERNAL our God has commanded you...” (Deuteronomy 6:20)

The rabbis who authored the Passover Haggadah saw that the Torah repeats this again and again to emphasize that different children will ask different kinds of questions, seeking different kinds of meaning. Hence, there are four different children of the Passover Seder: the wise, the provocative, the whole-hearted, and the quiet. We remember that children approach learning in individual ways, and we must answer each accordingly. The richest meaning emerges when we acknowledge the uniqueness of each learner.

In progressive education circles, it is common to call for child-led emergent curriculum where students devise what they want to learn. Conversely, Rabbi A.J. Heschel writes that all the rituals and commandments of Torah are “sources of emergent meaning.”<sup>2</sup>

The Jewish curriculum has survived several thousand years by evoking emergent meaning. It blooms when we respect the questions that each learner brings.

Franz Rosenzweig, the great 20th-century Jewish philosopher, believed that it was only possible to make meaning for oneself by first passing through the teachings of previous generations who had made meaning before. At the same time, Rosenzweig wrote that true learning begins “only where the subject matter ceases to be subject matter and changes into inner power.”<sup>3</sup>

Learning happens when the old teachings of the parents are transformed into a new spirit in the heart of each child. This is Jewish teaching that is also child-centred learning.

<sup>1</sup> Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. Alex Kozulin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, “No Time for Neutrality,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 76.

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# The Art of Jewish Imagination

We place our glowing Chanukiah in the window to demonstrate our faith in miracles—faith in the ability to imagine that which seems unlikely, improbable, but nevertheless, worth striving for.

This issue of THINK arrives between the Jewish festivals of Sukkot and Chanukah. Both illuminate the art of Jewish imagination.

During Sukkot, Jewish people around the world observe the mitzvah *leshev basukkah*, to reside in a temporary dwelling. The ritual recalls the ancient Israelite experience: fleeing slavery to wander for 40 years in makeshift huts. The week that we spend in a sukkah stimulates our thoughts to roam from our backyards and balconies to another place and time in our people's journey; it rekindles sensitivity to the experience of vulnerability and transition. Many refugees today live in temporary shelters.

An old folk story tells of a person who built a sukkah and carried in household belongings to use during the festival.

There wasn't enough material to enclose the sukkah completely but this didn't matter because Jewish law permits one wall to be built with *tzurat hapetach*—two posts covered with a beam that can be imagined as a full wall.

The day before Sukkot, the builder found that the family possessions had been stolen from the sukkah. Evidently, the thief entered through the open wall space and snatched the dishes, table cloth, and other items. Incredulous, the builder exclaimed, "How could a thief get into my sukkah? Didn't the ignoramus know that there was a wall there?!"

The laws of Sukkot exemplify three dimensions of imagination that are prominent in Jewish tradition, consciousness, and practice. The first is the kind of thinking that produces compassion by leading us to imagine the experience of

others. In the sukkah we sense a familiar fragility and impermanence; we remember that freedom is tenuous and that insecurity feels uncomfortable; we remember what it means to wander.

We recall a similar idea in the Passover Haggadah, which obligates one to see oneself as if having personally left Egypt. The idea of "seeing oneself" in a place and circumstance other than where we are, especially when this circumstance is one of suffering, is a central act of imagination that produces compassion, solidarity, and a sense of concern for others.

A second kind of imagination central to Judaism is the conception of law. The sukkah builder in our tale was affronted by a lapse in imagination on the part of the thief who crossed a boundary that was invisible yet configured conceptually by Jewish law.

There is nothing tangible or physically real about law; in truth, the notion of "legal fiction" applies to the very idea of law itself. Laws are ideas created in and by our imagination. When accepted, they help society function coherently.

But Jewish law is not merely functional, like a traffic code; it is primarily ethical. In Judaism, Revelation, the gift of law, epitomized by the Ten Commandments, is God's gift to our imagination. Jewish law is not merely a functional law—traffic lights and such—but an ethical law: law that raises us above the less admirable impulses of human nature.

Whereas the laws of physics describe how things "are" (or how they are observed to behave), moral law describes how we imagine the world should be. The moral philosopher Emmanuel Kant refers to moral law as the principle that describes how we "ought" to act. As moral law, Jewish law imagines how we ought to live our lives; it is an act of moral imagination.

Ruminating on Sukkot and Jewish imagination, Rabbi Norman Lamm observes that we live our regular lives by certain illusions—not only in the intellectual disciplines, such as law and science, but in the deepest recesses of our individual and ethnic consciousness. Without the proper illusions, life can become meaningless and a drudgery.

One of the most recognizable "illusions" is the presumption of innocence in common law today. Rabbinic law imagines that "man is basically good...created but little lower than the angels; in other words, that man has a *neshamah*, a soul." Lamm describes *hezkat kashrut* as a "presumption of being decent and honest" without which "there can be no

trust, no loyalty, no faith. And, therefore, there can be no transactions, no marriage, and no happiness."

A third dimension of Jewish imagination relates to envisioning the future. One of the most powerful aspects of Jewish imagination is that it must not remain in our heads; we must bring it to life. We are not meant merely to imagine a better, more just world. Explicit laws—such as the *mitzvot* of *tzedakah*, *tikkun olam*, *bikkur cholim*—proscribe that we are meant to live it. We must act righteously, repair the world, and care for the sick.

The most ardent expression of the passion of the Jewish imagination is daily prayer, a personal declaration of the desire for the world to become as we imagine it should be. Each of the *bakashot*—the requests within the central Amidah prayer—calls for something which we imagine and want for ourselves, our community, and the world: healing, peace, justice, unity, integrity.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel identifies the imaginative power of prayer: "Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget... It teaches us what to aspire to... So often we do not know what to cling to. Prayer implants in us the ideals we ought to cherish." When we pray for the coming of the Messiah, we imagine an ultimate time of peace, justice, and unity among peoples, the ultimate horizon of the Jewish imagination.

In Canada, after Sukkot, we re-enter our homes of brick and mortar and find shelter for the coming winter. We value permanence and appreciate our solid houses. Soon enough we will celebrate another festival that situates our imagination at our windowsills. At Chanukah we light candles or oil lamps to recall the miracles that occurred during the time of the Maccabees. In the glow of the flickering flames, we imagine how a small amount of a precious resource—sanctified oil—lasted much longer than expected; we imagine how people preserved their unique identities in the midst of overwhelming pressure to assimilate. We place our glowing Chanukiah in the windows of our homes to demonstrate our faith in miracles: which is to say, our faith in the ability to imagine that which seems unlikely, improbable, but nevertheless, worth striving for. Long life to Jewish imagination! L'chaim! Happy Chanukah!

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# Commitment to Deep Thinking

The biblical account of the creation of the world begins with depth: “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a tumult and a tumble, and the spirit of God hovered above the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:1–2).

Those who dismiss the biblical account—*how could the world be created in seven days?*—read this text superficially, ignoring its appeal to depth. The first chapter of Genesis is structured in layers; each day of creation is an iteration adding to and enriching what comes before it—like a painting that begins in simple shades of “dark and light” and develops to become a vibrant, full-colour work of art. Genesis commits us, in multiple ways, to think deeply.

In his acclaimed book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr describes the Internet as the latest evidence of Marshall McLuhan’s adage “The medium is the message.” Carr writes:

Whether I’m online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.<sup>1</sup>

With its ability to hyperlink information, the Internet offers an easy and vast sea of data. Unfortunately, without deep thinking, the knowledge that it delivers up is random, meaningless. Innovation and discovery rarely come from skimming, sampling, and collating; the face of creation relates to the deep.

Other than the practice of safe surfing—heads up for sharks and phishing—we educators need not allocate precious teaching time showing our students how to use the Internet. Born into the medium, they swim in it better than we do. But, how to think in the depths is another matter. Partly because deep thinking swims against the current, and partly because it involves techniques that are not self-evident, navigating deep waters well requires real skill.

## Seven practices for a wondrous future:

### 1. Being in the Question

Deep thinking means engagement with dilemmas that are complex and have no immediate solutions; the deep thinker needs first to feel okay *being in the question*. Biblical creation

begins with *Tohu Vavohu*—tumble, tumult, chaos, messiness. Deep thinkers live with cognitive dissonance and learn to work steadily through a problem; students must tolerate the discomfort of not knowing and hold open the questions that have no answers. Learning to *be in the question* requires open-ended inquiry, compound multi-stage problems, and project-based activities. Mindfulness practices—meditation or prayer—provide contemplation and wonder without immediate resolution.

### 2. Iteration

The Genesis text continues, “and there was evening and there was morning.” Again and again it cycles back to the same thought. Iterative thinking also returns repeatedly to the same question, but at increasingly deeper levels. It assumes that solutions achieved are provisional, and that even better solutions await discovery. Each year, the Jewish calendar returns us to familiar moments—Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Chanukah, Purim, Pesach, Shavuot. Each time we revisit, we learn something new and go deeper.

### 3. Revision

Connected to iteration is the willingness to revise. Revisiting and revising one’s work is a key practice in deep thinking; each revision makes a story, essay, or mathematic solution more elegant. There is tremendous value in using an eraser (or the delete key), in rewriting a paragraph, and composing two, three, or even four drafts to achieve a better outcome. The ethical version of this skill is the rabbinic concept of *Teshuva*, which means to reflect on and revise one’s actions.

### 4. Experimentation

Deep thinkers explore and test the sustainability of their ideas. Experiments lie at the root of the Scientific Method, which renders many of humanity’s greatest insights. What makes the scientific method credible is the process of trial and error, with the possibility, even probability, that an experiment will not support a hypothesis. “Mistakes” or “errors” can signal that thinking is reaching a new frontier.

### 5. Introspection and Dialogue

Self-knowledge is essential to deep thinking, in terms of a capacity to acknowledge and screen out one’s biases, assumptions, and beliefs. The mindset includes skill to focus, concentrate, and regulate one’s impulses. The complement

to this self-awareness is the ability to engage in honest dialogue with others, to register alternative points of view and to learn from difference.

### 6. Thinking in the Disciplines

Deep thinkers learn to view problems through different frameworks and appreciate the filtering of various lenses. This is the true value of learning the diverse ways of thinking, which come to learners, in school tradition, as “academic disciplines” and “subjects,” such as science, math, writing, ethics, and so on. Deep thinkers regard academic disciplines as ways of thinking, not storehouses of information. The Internet can tell us that the universe is 14 billion years old and was created with a Big Bang; deeper learning shares the evidence that scientists used to develop the explanation; deeper yet is to understand how the evidence was discovered by the scientific method; and still more profound is to practise the scientific method oneself and internalize the system.

### 7. Awe and Wonder

Rabbi A.J. Heschel reminds us, “Wonder, not doubt, is the beginning of knowledge.” Wonder is the amazement that drives the desire for complex knowledge and far-reaching comprehension. It is not a feeling that can be assuaged by

googling for an answer; wonder is a constant openness to the depths of what remains mysterious.

Like the seven days of creation, these seven practices prepare students for a deep and wondrous future. To solve important problems and create the next wave of innovation, we must all remain willing to go deeper. Albert Einstein is credited with saying, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.”

Today, as knowledge swims in shallow waters, commitment among educators to deep thinking is paramount. Like the biblical Nachshon ben Aminadav, educators must be willing to wade out from the shores of rote learning and superficial curricula. Teachers must have faith in their own experience of the depths to help children explore their own deep thinking and realize their full potential. We must remember that children can swim in the deep end of learning. Moses called for the waters of the Reed Sea to part so the Israelites could move forward, but the miracle happened and the path opened only when Nachshon went into the deep.

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), p. 7.



# Belonging as the Foundation of Learning

ARE CHILDREN INDIVIDUALS THAT MAKE A TEAM  
OR ARE WE A TEAM THAT MAKES INDIVIDUALS?

**T**he desire to belong is a basic desire of all human beings. Intuitively, we all know this, and now a new field, called the “science of relationships,” affirms it. Baumeister and Leary, two leading researchers in the field, state that “human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong.”<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to education, we know that children thrive and learn where they feel a sense of belonging. It’s instructive to look at how we imagine belonging is nurtured at school and then explore what the view of belonging, gleaned from Jewish sources, can mean for children and their learning.

At school we can readily notice that students experience a sense of belonging when they are part of a project that involves others, such as a sports team, a drama production, or planting a garden. Children can derive a sense of belonging through shared purpose: winning the game, staging the show, completing the project. This feeling of membership arises not only from the achievement but also from the experience of jointly pursuing the goal. Repeatedly, I witness the remarkable way in which school plays, garden clubs, choirs, and team sports galvanize my students.

While we easily observe the bonding that comes with success and victory, we can also notice social implications that emerge through the shared experience of losing a game. A hard-fought team effort resulting in a narrow loss may generate stronger team cohesion than a decisive win achieved through the talents of one or two team members. Win or lose, camaraderie is heightened when there is a strong feeling of shared effort.

The sense of belonging that derives from a shared goal depends, in part, on the child finding and playing a specific role within the project. On a sports team, it means playing one’s position—forward, defender, goalie—appropriately. In a theatrical production, each cast member must embrace

and play his/her role—leading, supporting, or managing scenes backstage—effectively. There is often a hierarchy of roles, and to some degree, gratifying participation relies on the child’s willingness to accept his/her role. Sometimes a child may subjugate important aspects of his/her individuality in order to play a specific social role. It can go too far and result in bullying, group-think, and other psychologically or even physically harmful behaviours.

Jewish sources, traditions, and practices teach us another way in which the human desire to belong can be expressed. This is a way that does not depend on a common goal, joint project, or well-played role. For lack of a better term, I call it “absolute belonging.”

The idea of absolute belonging, no doubt, originated in the notion of “birthright.” The 20th-century philosopher Franz Rosenzweig identifies this core aspect of Jewish belonging when he writes that each person belongs “already through being born.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, Judaism has for millennia extended the concept of absolute belonging beyond only those born Jewish. Whether by birth or by choice (conversion), once one is part of the community, one belongs automatically, regardless of what one does, one’s role, or one’s level of Jewish proficiency.

The notion of absolute belonging resonates in ancient Jewish texts and concepts. The mystical rabbinic notion that “we were all at Sinai”<sup>3</sup> suggests that every Jewish person, of every generation throughout time, was present at Mount Sinai to hear the revelation of Torah when God spoke to Moses. The mystical aspect presents the very clear idea that each and every Jew is an intrinsic member with a voice in the community of teachers and learners of Torah.

In the even more ancient text of the Book of Leviticus, we read that performance of sacrificial offerings was incumbent on all members of the community, regardless of gender,

social status, or means. This inherent pluralism endures. In contemporary Judaism, the way we pray in our synagogues and schools still exemplifies the double structure of collective membership with individual integrity. We pray in *minyanim*, sharing common words and melodies as a community. At the same time, we respect that individuals experience prayer each in their own way, at their own level of understanding, and that their appreciation is personal. This complexity comprises our Jewish sense of belonging.

At The Toronto Heschel School we are mindful to ensure that all children see themselves as participants and leaders. Each has the opportunity, indeed the obligation, to participate. All assume leadership roles, yet are not assigned duties based on who is perceived to possess talent for a predetermined “best” level. Children learn that all voices belong. We attend to and respect both the mellifluous voice of Miriam and the hesitant voice of Moshe. We ensure universal participation with the pluralistic respect for individual families’ expressions of Jewish observance. The collective duties of Leviticus are carried out remembering that each of us was at Sinai.

A community of absolute belonging promotes individuality and diversity of belief and expression without the threat of ostracization or exclusion. This community also nurtures collective responsibility among participants to fill roles that strengthen the community, even if one does not agree with every aspect of the doctrine of the moment. When a child grows up with a sense of absolute belonging, she/he develops a sense of intrinsic self-worth that is not dependent on success in a particular role or project. She becomes willing to collaborate and explore within her safe haven.

Children thrive in a community of absolute belonging because they are free to take on and try multiple roles. They thrive because they are challenged to take risks and develop themselves in new ways. They thrive because their individuality is respected even as their contribution to the collective is required. They thrive because absolute belonging provides the strongest security for the freedom to learn.

1 R.F. Baumeister and M.R. Leary, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3) (1995), pp. 497–529.

2 Franz Rosenzweig, *God, Man, and the World: Lectures and Essays*, translated and edited by Barbara E. Galli (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), p. 101.

3 Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 146a.

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Children learn that  
all voices belong.





# Shema

## THE HABIT OF LISTENING

It is a virtue to speak well, but what does it mean to listen well? Listening is a habit of mind quite foreign to the bustle of our modern lives.

In the summer of 2007 I sat in the desert and listened. Travelling Israel with Jewish educators thanks to the Mercaz,<sup>1</sup> we paused in the Arava, sat in silence and listened.

At first, listening is not easy. One's mind fills the ears with the chatter of thoughts and concerns, but soon enough, the emptiness of the rocky desert absorbs these sounds and listening begins.

The most persistent sound was the rhythmic gusting of the wind: the desert taking deep strong breaths. There was the occasional rustle of the determined scrub; the skimming of grains of sand lifted by the wind; then, when the wind subsided, the deep silence of the mountains. When our group reassembled, we reflected on the text where the prophet Eliyahu hears God as *Kol Tefillah Dakah* a still, quiet voice (1 Kings 19:12).

Too often education favours speaking over listening. We encourage students to express themselves, to find their voice. We focus on developing skills for oral expression and this is important, of course.

We must also remember that listening is a virtue and a skill, one of key habits of mind enabling us to learn deeply, to appreciate the world and to become ethical citizens. Listening must be developed and nurtured.

Judaism appreciates the critical role of listening. Twice a day we are encouraged to recite the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, HaShem is our God, HaShem is one." We utter this phrase in a hushed voice, intimately reminding ourselves to listen for the unity of reality.

In speech, we utter pre-formed notions, discrete ideas. In listening, we open ourselves to connections and ideas not previously considered. Torah recognizes the profound relationship between listening and deep understanding. When accepting the Torah at Sinai, the people of Israel declared, "*Na'aseh VeNishmah*" meaning "first we do, then we will hear." Hearing is interpreted here to mean understanding. At the moment of truth, listening, hearing, and understanding are one.

In educational theory, progressive constructivist thinkers connect knowledge to action, saying learning comes through doing. Judaism adds that learning comes also through listening. To help our children learn, we may do well to reflect on what kind of activities nurture listening as a skill and habit of mind.

Nature is one of the best places to encourage listening. Enjoy a hike in a local ravine. Stop every now and then to listen to the ever-deepening palette of sounds. Paddle a canoe to the quiet places where motor boats can't go. The sound of a paddle in lake water is sublime.

We also want our children to listen to others. Arthur Costa includes "Listening with Empathy and Understanding" in his list of "Habits of Mind." He describes listening as "devoting mental energy to another person's thoughts and ideas; mak[ing] an effort to perceive another's point of view and emotions."<sup>2</sup>

In our school program we nurture the listening habit by creating opportunities for students to hear each others' thoughts, opinions, and creative work. In civics class students engage in democratic discussion and decision making, with classes structured to encourage active listening and the appreciation of others' ideas.

At home, simple practices can emphasize the value of listening. Ensuring equal air time at the dinner table is one. Another is to avoid interruption when someone is speaking.

From a Jewish point of view, knowledge and ethics are linked and listening is the root of both. We listen to learn, and we listen to recognize the value of other people. The modern Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, identifies this in the rabbinic idea that we were all at Sinai. He writes,

It is as if a multiplicity of persons...were the condition for...absolute truth, so that some facets would never have been revealed if certain people were absent from [hu]mankind...the uniqueness of each act of listening carries the secret of the text; the voice of Revelation, in precisely the inflection lent by each person's ear, (and each) is necessary for the truth of the Whole.<sup>3</sup>

Each of us hears in our own way. This is the true beginning of the search for learning. With a new year ahead, let us dedicate time to training our ears and to the gentle art of listening.

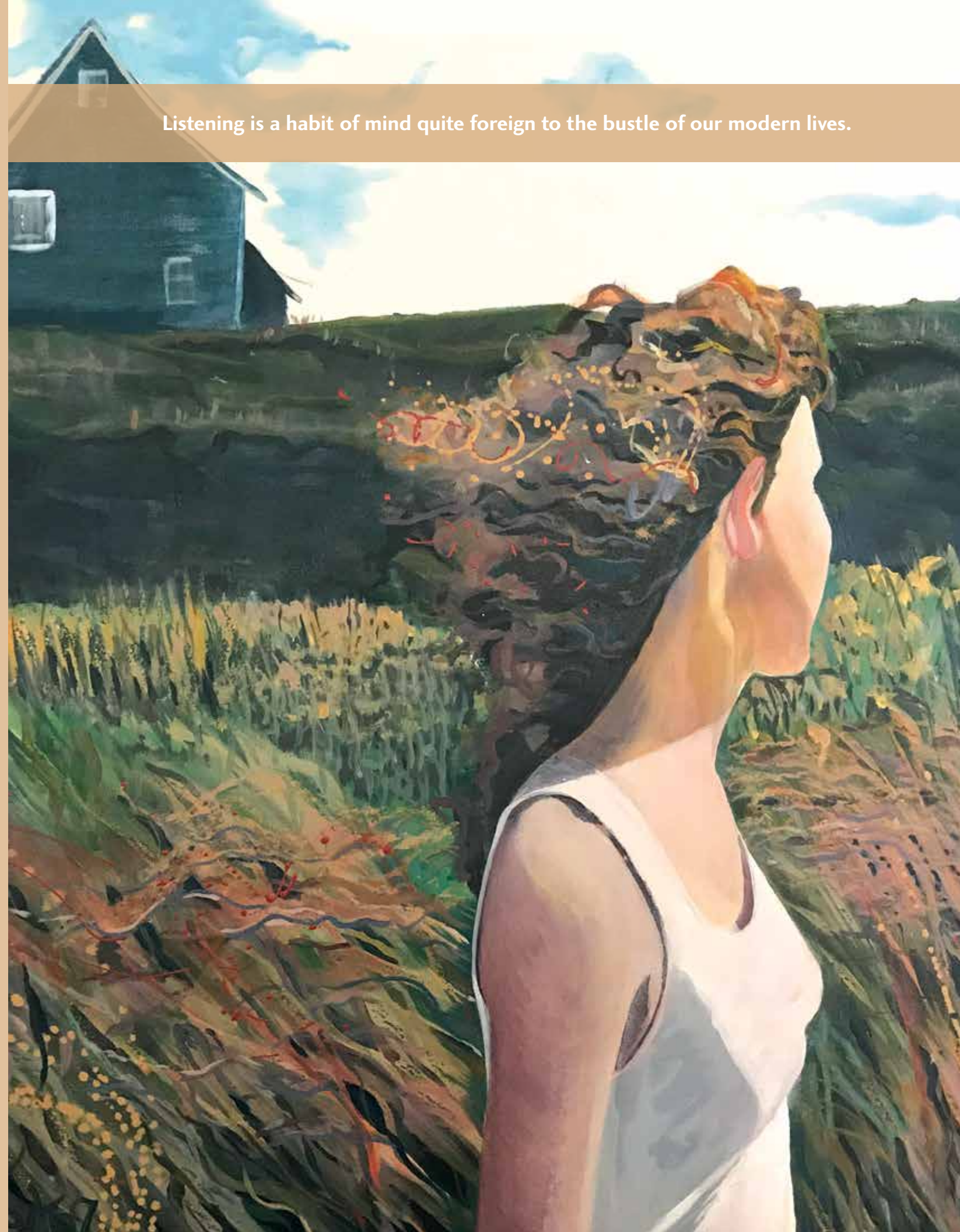
<sup>1</sup> UJA Federation of Greater Toronto.

<sup>2</sup> A. Costa and B. Kallick, *Habits of Mind: A Developmental Series* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," in *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 129-150.

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Awareness of one's own learning process is  
an essential element in higher-order thinking.

## Eddies in Time

THE SPIRAL-LINEAR JEWISH CURRICULUM

In his lyrical and edifying book *The Sabbath*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes the unique role that time plays in Judaism. While other civilizations build cathedrals and monuments, Judaism, says Heschel, creates an “architecture of time.” “Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.”<sup>1</sup>

What is the nature of Jewish time? In his bestselling history, Thomas Cahill offers that one of the great contributions of Jewish thought to world culture is the idea of linear time. In *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*, Cahill explains that most ancient civilizations regarded time as cyclical: days, seasons, years, life, and death all repeat in endless cycles. Biblical narratives, on the contrary, suggest a forward progression where events begin one place with a particular person and end somewhere else: Abraham and Sarah leave Ur to begin a nation whose future is foreseen in the stars; Moshe and Miriam initiate an Exodus from Egypt that is fulfilled a generation later in Eretz Israel. While ancient Babylon, Egypt, and even Greece perceived time as cyclical, the Jews, claims Cahill, introduced linear, advancing time that underpins the Western ideal of progress.<sup>2</sup>

I suggest that Cahill is half-correct. It was the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, not a Jew, who stated, “No person ever steps in the same river twice,” for the river flows on, always changing, never staying the same. Conversely, it was a Jew, the wise King Solomon, who is credited with the words, “There is nothing new beneath the sun” (Kohelet); the wizened king spoke of the sun, the rivers, and the generations of humanity coming and going in endless cycles.

In fact, Jewish thought recognizes both linear and cyclical time. The fruitful question to ask is: What is the relationship between cycles and journeys, between reiterations and progressions? I propose that we consider a “spiral-linear” model for Jewish learning—a particularly Jewish kind of “spiral curriculum,” in which our cycles produce progression and our repetitions reveal discoveries.

As Jewish educators, we recognize Jewish cycles, first and foremost, in the holidays of the year. The annual roster of *chaggim* provides structure to our school curriculum. Each year students hear, once again, the narratives and rituals of Sukkot, Chanukah, Tu Bish'vat, Purim, Pesach, Lag B'Omer, and Shavuot. When they hear the same story each year, and revisit the laws and rituals associated with each holiday, children develop a standard vocabulary and framework. Basic knowledge is learned and repeated, as a foundation for more sophisticated analysis. Annually, students re-encounter familiar themes from new perspectives. A year older, they have different questions and new understandings about what it means for Pharaoh to harden his heart, for Esther to approach the king, for the Maccabees to start a revolution. Because the basic material is not new, there are far more opportunities for learning to extend more deeply. With remembered themes and narratives recurring,

children are primed to build on, link to, and revise previous thinking.

When they revisit previously encountered material and last year's learning, students notice changes in their own thinking: “When I was five, I used to think..., now I realize...” This awareness of one's own learning process is an essential element in higher-order thinking. Often referred to as metacognitive capacity, the ability to reflect on their own thinking allows learners to gain control of their learning process. They come to regard learning, not as passive absorption, but as an active and intentional act that they, as learners, can own and direct themselves over the years yet to come.

The spiral-linear Jewish curriculum is also an antidote to the modern culture of novelty and the relentless drive for newness that gives the mind no place to rest. If students deal only with new material, their learning remains superficial, while novelty provides the illusion of having learned more. Cycling annually through familiar holiday themes and material, students steady their footing on the plateau of the known, and then leap to the next height. Their most valuable gratification comes not from newness but from the satisfaction of accomplishment and mastery; they feel invigorated and confident and ready for the next challenge.

A stone placed in a river will cause a swirling eddy to form, a cycle in the midst of the linear flow of the stream. I can recall moments as a young child when I was fascinated by these swirls, and spent dreamy minutes peering into them. Eddies in rivers, and other natural cycles that seem to go nowhere, are openings that let the mind focus, travel, imagine, and wonder.

I have long considered Jewish rituals, especially the weekly ritual of Shabbat, to be like river stones in the flow of time. In my experience, Shabbat and other Jewish holidays are eddies in the river where family conversations spin, imaginative games show up, songs are sung, and stories come around at a leisurely pace. Sometimes we even float a bit in boredom, which, it turns out, can sail us off into an inventive mode of thought that we could never have entered in the busyness of the week.

It may indeed be that the progressive, innovative quality that Thomas Cahill attributes to Jewish thought is sourced in the cycles of Jewish time where focus, contemplation, and deep thinking are nurtured. I encourage Jewish educators to look to the spiral-linear structure of our tradition, to resist the temptation to “change it up” just for the sake of change. Instead, let's notice how cycles, reiterations, and pedagogical “eddis” may be the sources we seek for focused, innovative thinking.

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Cahill, *The Gift of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

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# Ritual for Our Time

Jewish tradition recounts a debate among the ancient rabbis over which biblical passage might encapsulate the whole teaching of the Torah. One rabbi states that the verse announcing the unity of God—“Hear, O Israel, HaShem is our God, HaShem is one”—contains the whole Torah. A second rabbi responds that the ethical verse “You will love your neighbour as yourself” is the preeminent verse. A third rabbi declares, “You will sacrifice a lamb in the morning and another after dusk” and claims this as the quintessential verse of the Torah.<sup>1</sup>

To the contemporary ear, the first two positions sound reasonable: the idea of monotheism, of a unifying force in the universe seems like a pretty significant concept, worthy of representing the whole Torah. Likewise, the ethical principle of the Golden Rule resonates with us. But the third position, the suggestion that the whole Torah can be discerned in the principle of daily animal sacrifice, seems outdated and, to some, even ethically offensive. Why, then, does the master of the rabbis conclude that, in fact, the law is in accordance with this third position?

We must first avoid the easy temptation to disregard the ruling as an anachronism and no longer relevant: “Animal sacrifice? We don’t do that anymore. Loving our neighbours as ourselves—well that’s a more modern idea.” Better, would be to regard this ruling as a metaphor. As the Talmudic scholar Adin Steinsaltz wittily remarked, anyone who reads biblical laws concerning oxen and thinks that an ox is just an ox is himself an ox.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the sacrifice of an ox or, in this case, a lamb is a metaphor; but a metaphor for what? And how does this metaphor help us as educators?

At one level, it is a metaphor that speaks to the importance of daily ritual. As educators and parents, we know that children benefit both cognitively and emotionally from daily ritual. Daily ritual provides children, especially young children, with a sense of stability and comfort. It allows them to anticipate the day, and to appreciate patterns in their everyday routines. And this, in turn, aids creativity and insight. It is on the canvas woven by regularity that children feel safe and confident enough to take creative risks. Against a background of patterns, it becomes possible to notice irregularities and to innovate.

And yet, modern people and modern educators are often suspicious of ritual. To be sure, rituals sometimes serve merely as a way of maintaining control. We have all met teachers who insist on certain classroom routines—sitting a certain way, writing the date a certain way, and so on. Some students thrive in this kind of structure, but others find it oppressive and unnecessary. For some, ritual means certainty, for others it seems to conflict with freedom and authenticity: Why do

you have to say please and thank you if you don’t feel grateful? Why would you say blessings over food before and after eating if you’re not sure that you “believe in” God? (As if belief is a matter of being sure!)

There is an aspect to ritual that is not only about structure and regulation. The text concerning the twice-daily sacrifice of a lamb is also a metaphor for something else: it is a metaphor for making an offering. In ancient Israel, animal sacrifice was used to make an offering to God as a sign of gratitude or to seek forgiveness for a misdeed. In other words, ritual sacrifice was a way to strengthen, maintain, or restore a relationship with the Divine.

Today, human beings use rituals in an analogous way. We have set practices, customs, and habits that we hold onto and observe with respect. The ritual of giving gifts on special occasions, of offering kind and polite words, of holding the door open for someone to enter, or apologizing for a misunderstanding—all of these are rituals that initiate, maintain, strengthen, or restore relationships.

When the master rabbi affirmed the primacy of the twice-daily sacrifice, his decision acknowledged both dimensions of ritual: its regularity and its power to build relationships. By emphasizing regularity as well as relationship, the rabbi taught that ritual not only expresses the relationships we already have—with people or with God—but also, when done on a regular basis, ritual actually produces these relationships! We hold the door open not only for our friends but also as a gesture that opens up the possibility to engender new friendships.

This becomes much clearer when we look at how the aforementioned debate among the rabbis is structured. The unity of God, which is to say, the recognition of the sanctity of all God’s creation is the ultimate goal. A key way to achieve this goal is to recognize the sanctity of each person—to treat each person as oneself. But the method or way to actually do this practically is through daily rituals of offerings—whether by word or deed. The rabbis established the primacy of ritual as the “law,” because the law, like ritual, teaches us how to act and behave despite how we may feel.

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas summarizes this understanding of the rabbis’ debate:

The way that leads to God, therefore leads to man [i.e. humanity]; and the way that leads to man draws us back to ritual discipline and self-education. Its greatness lies in its daily regularity.<sup>3</sup>

Several years ago, The Toronto Heschel School initiated a school-wide ritual practice called *Middat Hashavuah*—the

Ritual helps to create the culture  
that builds community.

“weekly ethical practice.” Each week, students and staff focus on implementing a particular ethical action (*middah*), which can be derived from the weekly Torah portion. Students review the *middah* with their teacher each morning and discuss ways to implement it. As part of their Shabbat preparation at week’s end, the students reflect together on how well and in which ways they have practised the *middah* over the course of the week.

The school also guides students in practising other rituals during their day; for example, performing *netilat yadayim* (the ritual handwashing prior to meals) and reciting *birkat hamazon* (the blessing after meals). The school requires that each day the students take time to care and clean their classroom and the common lunchroom.

Despite resistance from some students contending that they “don’t believe” in a particular ritual, and from some parents who argue that they don’t pay tuition to have students wipe down tables, Heschel teachers have worked hard to maintain these rituals, primarily through role-modelling. As these rituals have become an embedded part of our school’s daily practice, we have noticed a palpable change in our lunchroom culture—it has become a quieter, calmer, more respectful environment. Ritual helps to create the culture that effectively builds community.

Ritual is the main theme of the third book of the Torah, *Sefer Vayikra* (Leviticus). I have always considered *Sefer Vayikra* to be the “heart” of the Torah, not only because of its position as the third of the five books of the Torah but especially because of its significance as a spiritual-ethical guide. Most progressive Jewish schools tend to skip over the lengthy portions of *Sefer Vayikra* that deal with the details of animal sacrifice and other ritual affairs. Instead, they focus only on chapter 19, the famous “Holiness Code,” which contains such ethical gems as “love your neighbour as yourself.” At The Toronto Heschel School, we believe that, in order to appreciate the ethical messages of the Holiness Code, students must study the chapters concerning animal sacrifice, kashrut, and other ritual practices. These chapters remind us that the most beautiful ethical imperatives will fail us unless we appreciate and regularly practise the self-discipline and generosity that rituals teach.

<sup>1</sup> A traditional midrash cited in *Ein Yaakov: The Ethical and Inspirational Teachings of the Talmud, Compiled in the Sixteenth Century by Rabbi Yaakov ibn Chaviv*, translated by Avraham Yaakov Finkel (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 1999), introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Raphael Ahren, “Never Mind the Bible, It’s the Sanity of the Talmud You Need to Understand the World and Yourself,” *Times of Israel*, August 9, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “A Religion for Adults,” in *Difficulty Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Delaware: The John Hopkins UP, 1990), p. 19.

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continued from page 7

## The mutual reinforcements in the Salmon Forest Ecosystem offer a model for our school.

watch their parents demonstrate care and respect for each other, and for teachers, they internalize these norms and, in turn, treat their friends well. The Heschel School has a Chevra Committee made up of dedicated parents who organize parent social events, deliver Shabbat welcome packages to new families, arrange shiva meals, and run an annual teacher appreciation week.

A prominent facet of the Heschel School ecosystem is the deeply embedded culture of social inclusion, rooted in the vision of pluralism. Families are encouraged both by school leaders and by veteran school families to uphold a practice of inclusion for parties, play-dates, and life-cycle celebrations. It is a school tradition for the entire class to be invited to *b'nai mitzvah* celebrations, and we have seen the power of this practice in the sense of the community it builds among the students. We encourage parents of children to speak to one another when social dilemmas involving their children arise. Families work collaboratively with teachers to resolve social-emotional and learning concerns. Experience has taught us that when parents communicate and problem-solve with each other and with the school, the class culture is healthier and students are more focused on their learning.

In a healthy school ecosystem, the learning supports the culture and the culture supports the learning. Curriculum committed to invention nurtures inspired teaching; teaching becomes inspired when it is nurtured by systems for professional collaboration and continued learning that are well conceived and reliable. Respectful, committed families inspire respectful, committed teaching, and vice versa.

A famous dictum of the Talmud teaches that we can learn modesty from the cat, honest labour from the ant, and good manners from the rooster (*Eruvin* 100b). Watching salmon we learn to create a flourishing learning community. Like the Salmon Forest of British Columbia, with interdependent synergistic relationships among salmon, bears, trees, berries, and rivers, The Toronto Heschel School is a thriving, diverse, unique, complex ecosystem; the dynamic interplay of the parts creates the beauty of the whole.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Hume, "Health of Salmon Run Affects Ecosystem of Forest," *The Globe and Mail* (Vancouver), March 24, 2011, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/health-of-salmon-run-affects-ecosystem-of-forest/article597181/>

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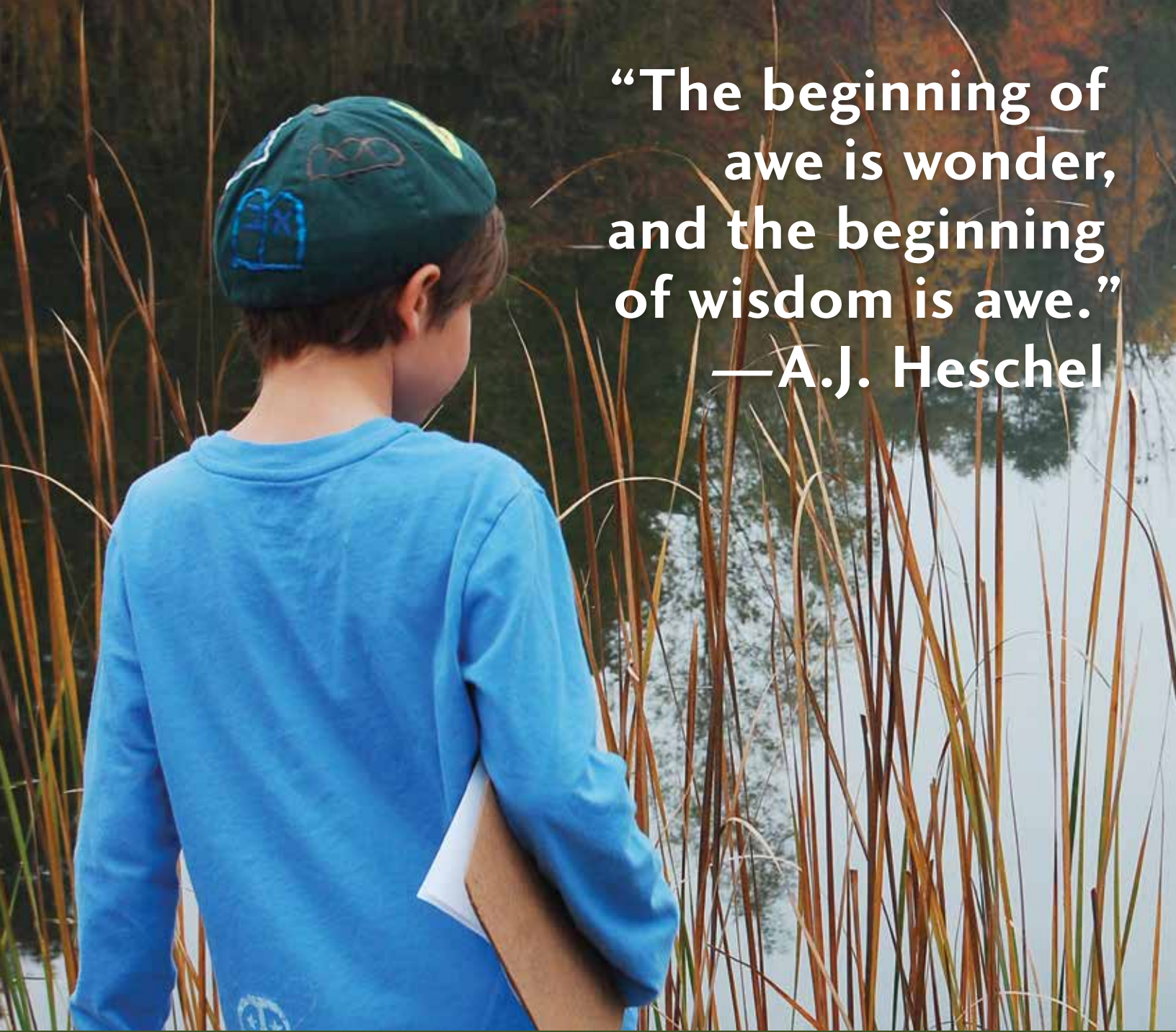
Greg Beiles became Director of The Lola Stein Institute in 2010 and Head of School at The Toronto Heschel School in 2014. For the 18 years prior to being named Head of School, Greg worked and taught at the school in increasingly senior capacities. From 2008 to 2010 he also served as Director of Curriculum and Training at The Lola Stein Institute.

Greg received his PhD from the Centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. His research explored the parent-child relationship as a paradigm for Jewish education. He holds an M.A. in Philosophy of Education from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

In addition to *THINK* magazine, Greg's publications include: "Jewish Education and Pluralistic Engagement," in *Discipline, Devotion and Dissent: The Promise and Problems of Jewish, Catholic and Islamic Schooling*, ed. G. McDonough, M. Memon, and A. Mintz (WLUP, 2013); "A Covenant of Commitment: Lessons and Characteristics of Mosaic Leadership," *Journal of Thought* (2002); and *And You Shall Love Your God, Noteworthy Practices in Jewish Day School Education, Volume II: Tefilah* (PEJE Publications, 2001).

Greg has led workshops and presentations in a variety of settings, including The Bridges Conference at the Banff Centre, York University, Jewish Federation of Ottawa, and The Lola Stein Institute. Workshop titles include: A Critical Thinking Approach to Numeracy; Five Senses and the Five Books of Moses; Metaphor and God; Understanding Understanding; Discipline and Wonder: Integrating the Theories of A.J. Heschel and Howard Gardner in an Educational Context.





“The beginning of  
awe is wonder,  
and the beginning  
of wisdom is awe.”  
—A.J. Heschel

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